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TRANSFORMING LAND TENURE SYSTEMS IN THE QUEST FOR GOLD:
ALUKU, WAYANA, AND THE STATE IN THE SURINAME
FRENCH GUIANA BORDER REGION

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Introduction

“We consider this [act] a violation of the human rights of the local Indigenous Wayana peoples and the tribal Aluku peoples” two Suriname Indigenous organizations wrote angrily to the French Ambassador for Suriname in July of the past year 2007 (Vernon 2007). Their outcry was a reaction to the removal and destruction of a gold mining raft in the Litani River by the French gendarmerie. This raft had been the property of the Wayana community of Kawemhakan, Suriname, and had been constructed for the purpose of “betterment of livelihoods” through the mining of gold.¹ In the heated media discussion that followed this event, the Suriname media portrayed the Indigenous Wayana peoples as victims of zealous French police authorities, who had violated Suriname’s sovereignty.

What caused so much upheaval in Suriname – and went mostly unnoticed in France – was not an isolated affair. In the past couple of years, the French authorities have launched a stringent policy against unlicensed gold mining.² The eradication of informal mining occurs, among others, by tracing and burning down illicit gold mining equipment. This particular incident attracted much attention because not Brazilian *garimpeiros* but local Indigenous peoples had been targeted. Moreover, the French had operated within the contested border zone and on Wayana customary lands – without consulting the Suriname national or Wayana local authorities. Whereas in French Guiana the incident was merely seen in the context of a regulatory policy, in Suriname it was perceived as the destruction of the traditional form of livelihood of innocent native peoples.³

This paper is about the equivocal relationships between forest peoples, governments, and small-scale gold mining in the border region of Suriname and La Guyane. We are interested in the ways that the Wayana Indigenous peoples and the Aluku Maroons use their historical relations to the land to reinforce resource claims and benefit from the new socio-economic realities of the region. The burned-pontoon-incident exemplifies the ambiguous relationship between the national laws and customary laws in the face of new eco-

conomic opportunities. We will argue that in the Suriname-French Guiana border region, local cultural rules and existing miners' laws are regulating the local gold mining industry, while state efforts to control it actually create chaos.

In both academic and popular writing on modern gold mining booms, Indigenous peoples are often portrayed as victims of miners' violence, environmental degradation, and mining-induced health problems such as increased malaria (Colchester, *et al.* 2002, MacMillan 1995). We want to show that in the study region, indigenous and tribal peoples are not passively suffering from the gold rush. In the contrary, they are active agents in steering gold mining developments in their homelands. Deconstructing the image of the "ecologically noble savage" (Redford 1991) many Wayana and Aluku individuals are explicitly choosing for the economic benefits brought by gold mining at the expense of their natural environment – though they may not be fully aware of the long-lasting environmental effects of mining. Not only do some members of the tribal communities own mining equipment, they also allow others to mine their lands against payment.

In the following pages we will proceed as follows. We will first give a description of Suriname and the gold mining boom that has spread across the country in the past two decades. Next we discuss formal and customary land rights in the Lawa region and analyze how these rights are applied in the context of gold mining. We reflect on the roles of the nation states and indigenous peoples in the local mining industry in the synthesis.

Our analysis is based on anthropological data collected in small-scale gold mining sites and forest communities in Suriname and, to a lesser extend, French Guiana. The research started in 1999 and has been ongoing since. We have learned about the perspectives, opinions, and activities of local people and migrants –both gold miners and others- through ethnographic interviews and observations. In addition, our analysis builds on newspaper clippings, conversations with policy makers in Paramaribo, and communication with Non Governmental Organizations working in the interior of Suriname. Because our research experience has been concentrated in Suriname, we write from the perspective of this country- even though our analysis takes us back and forth across the borders.

Suriname and the Lawa river region

Suriname is situated on the Northern tip of South-America. The dense tropical rainforest that covers 80 percent of the Suriname's land mass, named the interior, is home to different tribal groups of Indigenous Peoples (est. 18,000 people) and Maroons (est. 72,000 people) (Kambel 2006:10). The latter, Maroons, are the descendants of run-away African slaves who established independent communities in the rainforest in the 17th and 18th centuries. In addition, thousands of Brazilian migrants have entered the interior to try their luck in the country's booming gold industry since the early 1990s.

This paper focuses on the Lawa River region, delineating the – contested – border between Suriname and La Guyane (Image 1). The area is difficult to access. Situated on approximately 300 km from the capital cities of Paramaribo (Sur) and Cayenne (FG), no roads are leading from the coastal zone through the dense tropical forest to the Lawa River mine sites. The only way to get there is either with a small aircraft or by motorized dugout canoe. In the latter case, the trip takes two to three days across dangerous rapids.

In Suriname, the Wayana and Aluku living along the Lawa are virtually ignored by the national government; living too far from the capital city and being too small in numbers to be a real bother or of significance in election times. Even the largest Wayana and Aluku villages in the Suriname Lawa region, Kawemhakan (82 people) (Heemskerk, *et al.* 2006) and Cottica (374 people) (Kambel 2006:16) respectively, do not have electricity, running water, or educational facilities.⁴ Most Wayana families, and to a lesser extent the Aluku, continue to live a largely traditional lifestyle, depending on their natural environment for food, construction materials, and tools. For cash income, they rely virtually exclusively on small-scale gold mining and the surrounding service economy.⁵

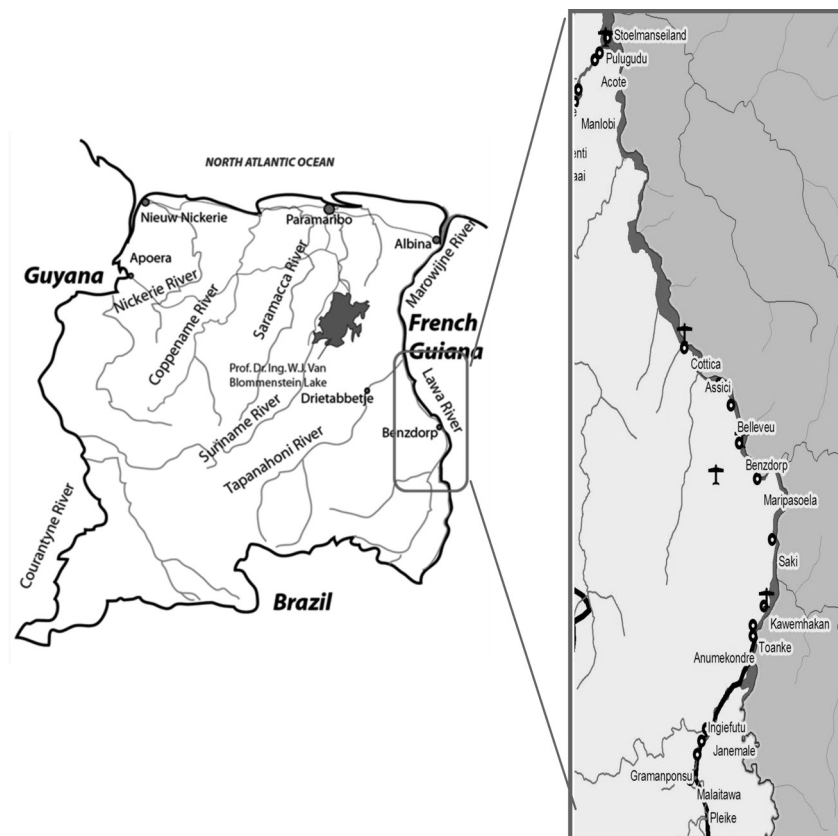
Very different is the situation in the French Wayana and Aluku village, which have since the late 1960s been subject to a process of Frenchification put forward by the French government (Bilby 1989a, 1989b, 1990, Boven 2006, Hurault 2000a, 2000b). Tribal people were urged to move to the French administrative centres, and half of the Aluku now live in the forest-town of Maripasoula. This town features various schools, a small yet modern hospital, a police post, and telecommunication services. Maripasoula also enjoys reliable supply electricity and running water. Education and access to French incomes through wage labour jobs and social services have alienated the younger generations from traditional occupations and the self-sufficient subsistence economy has been substituted by a money economy (Bilby 1990, Delpech 1993, Hurault 2000b).⁶ Even though similar changes are occurring among the French Wayana, they mostly continue to rely on their traditional subsistence activities and have remained more loyal to traditional cultural expressions.

From the early 1990's onwards, small-scale gold mining has grown from being almost non-existent to a booming economy, supporting thousands of local and migrant families. Today, gold has become one of the main export products of Suriname. More than half of the official gold production of Suriname is extracted by small-scale gold miners (International Monetary Fund 2007). The local forces driving the Suriname gold rush have been described elsewhere. They include, among others, the impoverishment of interior communities, the socioeconomic exclusion of Maroons in Suriname society, and a lack of employment opportunities for young Maroon men after a period of political instability (interior war, 1980-1992) (Heemskerk 2000). At the same time Brazilian *garimpeiros*, at home confronted with exhausting gold supplies, stricter environmental regulations, and prohibitions on mining

in indigenous reserves, were seeking for new working areas (Theije 2007). They swarmed out over the Guianas, where Suriname stands out as a country with relatively rich gold supplies, low government control on mining, and porous borders (Heemskerk & de Theije forthcoming). Today, 20 to 25 thousand people may be mining gold in Suriname and at least as many people are making a living as merchants, cooks, boatmen, ATV and tractor drivers, bar and brothel owners, and others services catering to the miners.

The main Suriname mining site in the study area is named Benzdorp. Most inhabitants of this *dorp* (village) are Brazilians; both *garimpeiros* and service providers such as sex workers. The village counts about 130-140 houses, as well as two large Chinese supermarkets, a Suriname supermarket, a pharmacy, and a large variety of bars and brothels. Maroons and Indigenous peoples can be found in the Benzdorp mining pits, but they are more actively engaged in the service economy.

Image 1: Suriname with the Lawa region and the main Indigenous and Maroon villages



Small-scale gold mining is not systematically regulated on a national level, although Suriname has a Mining Law that should do so. Large part of the territory is given out in concessions to Surinamese entrepreneurs but many of these are not involved in reconnaissance of their concession and leave it to small-scale miners, who pay either a fixed monthly fee or a percentage of the production (usually 10%) to the concession holder. This system violates the Mining law, but is half-heartedly tolerated by the government. Meanwhile the national concession system clashes with ruling conceptions of land rights in the interior. Both the Wayana Indigenous peoples and the Aluku Maroons claim part of the Lawa border region, including Benzdorp and surrounding mine sites, among their ancestral lands. In their view, one should resort to traditional authorities, the *granman* (Paramount chief) and *kapitein* (village headmen) for approval of mining activities.

Tribal land claims and and gold mining

Even though the Wayana and Aluku have lived on and used the lands they currently occupy for several centuries, they have neither private nor communal titles to these lands. Under the Suriname constitution, all land to which no one can prove ownership is considered state-property. Specific laws such as the Forestry Law of 1992 do demand that the customary rights of interior populations living in tribal communities are taken into account. However, the law does not provide measures for the protection of these rights nor define procedures for consultation, compensation, and appeal. France on its turn considers its territories indivisible, meaning tribal peoples cannot obtain rights to a part of the territories based on ethnicity.

Even though their territorial borders are not legally demarcated, the Wayana and Aluku themselves have a clear understanding of which area belongs to what group. These invisible frontiers are generally respected by the members of the respective tribal groups. National borders, on the other hand, are of little relevance. The Wayana and Aluku cross the borders of Suriname, French Guiana, and Brazil freely to work agricultural fields, visit relatives, go on hunting expeditions, and collect forest products. In doing so, they pay little attention to national authorities or required legal documents such as passports or ID cards.

Within their territories, the Wayana and the Aluku abide by customary rules for access to land and resources. These rules are well-known and generally respected by the members of the tribal societies. Both groups arrange access to land around membership of a certain family or clan. Among the Wayana, families operate rather autonomously in questions concerning land issuance. Only in the case that the land will be used for activities that affect the community, a meeting will be held on the issuance. Neither the land within a village or the hunting and fishing grounds and the timber areas outside of the village are divided per Indigenous family (Heemskerk, *et al.* 2006). Access to land in the area of another clan can be gained through marriage or permission from the local clan head. If an outsider wishes to enter or work

within the Indigenous territory, he/she has to consult the *granman* or *kapitein* who is authorized to grant permission.

The Aluku, like other Maroons, have much stricter rules on access to resources. The tribe is subdivided into clans (*lo's*), which further comprise families (*bee's*) that again consist of households (*oso's*). The land is parcelled out to *lo's*. The members of a certain *lo* are allowed to hunt or collect forest products for own consumption in the area claimed by another *lo*. However, official permission is required if larger quantities are extracted or more intensive land-use (e.g. gold mining) is taking place. Though the village *kapitein*, as head of the *lo*, regulates land use, individual members have rights to its resources including game, fish, and forest products. Decisions about large-scale mining and logging, either by tribal members or by outsiders, require extensive *krutu* (tribal meeting) sessions at the village or even tribal level.

Despite the lack of legal recognition and protection of their land rights, Indigenous Peoples and Maroons are not powerless in confrontation with the thousands of gold miners on their homelands. In the contrary, they have proven to be resourceful and determined in making sure that they benefit from gold mining activities on their lands. This is not only truth today, but characterizes the relations of particularly the Aluku with outsiders throughout their tribal history.

During the first gold rush, which captured the Lawa region between 1880 and 1910, few Maroons or Indigenous peoples directly participated in mining activities (Beet & Thoden van Velzen 1977:127). Nevertheless, the Maroons made good fortunes by transporting miners to remote interior areas. As the only ones able to navigate the turbulent rivers, they could ask steep prices for their transportation services. In addition, the Maroons supplied miners with food and other necessities. This may also have been the first time that the Aluku formally demanded taxes on resources extracted from what they consider to be their lands (Bilby 1989b, Polak 1908). The Wayana, being more isolated and less comfortable with outsiders, remained largely aloof of the hustling surrounding the regions first gold rush.

Almost a hundred years after the first gold rush, a new upsurge in gold mining activity has brought an unprecedented stream of migrants to the area; urban Surinamers, Ndjuka Maroons⁷ and, most of all, Brazilians. Informal migrant miners share the area with two companies that have obtained formal concession to the central part of the Benzdorp placer. State company Grassalco, which works in collaboration with the Canadian Canarc, has exploration rights to the Northern part of Benzdorp. The area known as South Benzdorp was given out to the private Suriname company NaNa Resources.

Just like in the earlier gold rush, the Aluku have been quick in safeguarding a piece of the golden pie for themselves. This time, in the early 1990's, several Aluku entrepreneurs ventured in mining. In Benzdorp, they began re-mining places that had already been worked in the previous century. Initially they worked manually, with shovels and pick-axes, a gold pan and a longtom.

Yet it did not take long until they began hiring Brazilians and learned how to work mechanically, with hydraulic equipment. As these pioneers were earning well, other Aluku rapidly followed in their footsteps, now also moving mining equipment to French Guiana (Mana River, Dorlin). Also they were successful at first. It must be noted that almost all of these Aluku miners were equipment owners, hiring Ndjuka Maroons and Brazilians as labour. With the onset of mining activities by the two formal concession holders, the Aluku lost their dominant position in the Lawa gold fields. These concession holders sublet parts of their concession to immigrant Brazilian and –to a lesser extend- Maroon equipment owners, who pay them a percentage-share of their earnings in exchange for protection and infrastructure. The equipment owners in turn hire Brazilian and Maroon workers to perform the physical work in the mines.

Besides through active involvement in mining and mining services, the Aluku are benefiting from gold mining by receiving payments from people mining on 'their' lands. 'Land lease' is arranged by the clan-heads, who have the right to destine land belonging to the clan to certain activities, albeit with permission of the elders and as long as the village benefits. For example the Aluku of Cottica (Suriname), monthly receive two drums of fuel from NaNa resources. The gasoline is used to operate the village generator for electricity, which the Suriname government fails to provide. The inhabitants of Cottica also would like to see that the concession holders build a drinking water installation for the village, so that the villagers no longer depend on the polluted river. They hardly complain about the mining-induced pollution in itself. How could they, when a majority of Cottica men are earning an income from gold mining in a region where other employment options are nil, especially for people without French papers.

Other than during the previous gold rush, this time the Wayana have become actively involved in many of the same ways as the Aluku have, be it in much smaller numbers and less visibly. The notorious mining raft we spoke about in the introduction, for example, belonged to the community of Kawemhakan and was bought with the support of Brazilian miners. In addition, Wayana *granman* Ipomadi Pelenapin in Kawemhakan collects levies (10 percent of production) from gold miners working within a 15 km radius from the village. Part of the money from miners is used for community projects, such as the construction of a central meeting space.

Formally, part of the mining concession of Nana resources is situated on Wayana lands, but efforts to come to a formal agreement between the executive director of Nana resources and the *granman* failed. Still occasional gifts are made by miners that are working for the company upriver from Kawemhakan. The Wayana realize that in the absence of rights to their land, they cannot demand payment from miners and have to live with whatever the miners feel is appropriate. Asked if he would not prefer a fixed arrangement with the company, *Kapitein* Pelenapin laments: "Yes. In fact we want to give

out the concession to others, but that is not possible. That is in hands of the government, to give permission.”⁸

In addition to money (gold), gold miners working on the Suriname Wayana lands regularly bring fuel that, like in Cottica, is used to provide the village with electricity. The indifferent attitude of the Suriname government towards its Lawa citizens forces the local people to close such deals, explains a young, French educated Wayana man: “Only the Brazilians and the Maroons give us fuel for the generator. The government gives five barrels a year. We are in a situation here where we need to negotiate, deal with these things.”

Value at the Lawa River

Interestingly is that now the ‘easy gold’ has been extracted (Theije 2008), the Wayana base their rights to the remaining gold in the region on their conservationist attitude. The Wayana *granman* of Kawemhakan explains how the Aluku want to move upriver now rich and shallow deposits are getting scarcer on their own lands but the Indigenous peoples, who have been ‘thrifty’ for all these years, also have a right to gold: “The agreement [between the Aluku and the Wayana] was that we live here together; we will work [gold] together. That was the agreement. But now there are almost no places left to work, north of Benzdorp there is no forest left. So, my opinion is, this is from us, Indigenous peoples, [for] when Indigenous peoples want to work gold.”

In other words, every tribal inhabitant has a right to a certain amount of natural resources. Those who have greedily extracted all have nothing left now, but those who have been economical, such as the Wayana, have something left. In the same interview, the captain says that the government has to protect the Indigenous peoples against an invasion of gold miners on their territories – even though the village is turning economically on ‘concession’ payments from miners and the delivery of services to them. Villagers are of the opinion that licences for stores and other small businesses catering to the gold miners in their territory should no longer be given to Brazilians, Chinese, and other outsiders. It is unfair that non-Wayana carpenters, store owners, sex workers, and miners are earning from the economic developments on their lands, while Wayana also have stores, and want the miners to buy there, complained a Wayana store owner in Kawemhakan.

Yet different Wayana have different interests. As the above man was venting his frustration at the increasing economic power of outsiders, the *kapitein* from a nearby Wayana settlement had just granted a Chinese merchant permission to start a store at his *kampu*, of course against regular payment. Another example of conflicting interests within the Wayana community is found in the increasing aversion of French Wayana against gold mining. River pollution, mercury contamination, and miners’ violence are increasingly affecting this mostly traditional community. These Wayana find that

national law enforcement agents do not listen to their concerns nor sufficiently protect them (see Open letter to President Sarkozy, dated 07/02/2008).⁹

Suriname Wayana, who cannot rely on the state for basic services, are much more dependent on the money from mining and on people from outside, says a young Wayana man in Kawemhakan: "Ten years ago our destiny was in our hands, but today [it] is not. There are more Brazilians, more black people, more persons who want to deal with you. It's a good thing, but only you want to make profit. That changed our life." Yet also here, there are increasingly voices to limit gold mining to certain areas. During our last visit to Kawemhakan in September 2008, the inhabitants stated that they approved of mining on parts of their territories that are already destroyed or less essential for subsistence. However, they do not want mining in crucial watersheds or creek beds. As long as they do not have formal rights to their ancestral lands though, the Wayana cannot stop gold miners from working there and might as well reap some economic benefits from their presence.

The Aluku also have become more conscious about the value of their traditional territory and the changes the current gold rush brings to their homeland. Aluku gold entrepreneurs organized a meeting in November 2006 to erect a cooperative of local gold miners to increase their grip on the economic development of the Benzdorp region. A main issue was that local people now are subject to the decisions of legal concession holders on what they consider their territory. They expressed concern about the uncontrolled mining activities of foreigners (*in casu* Brazilians) on the region. Although the introduction of clean mining methods was also on the agenda, concern for the natural environment was overshadowed by fear of losing income earning opportunities. The Aluku miners had until that moment acted as independent entrepreneurs, but now felt the need to organise on the basis of their ethnic identity and historical claims to the customary lands of their people. Vis-à-vis the Brazilian migrants they emphasized their Suriname identity, and vis-à-vis the concession holders and the Suriname state they stress their tribal Aluku identity.

A recent event underlined the Aluku's identity as original inhabitant of the interior in opposition to state interference with local affairs. In August 2008, Suriname launched Operation Clean Sweep. Eighty police men and military were launched into Benzdorp with the goal to "order the interior" by bringing an "end to all illegal activities in the interior, such as weapons, drugs and gold digging." (Tijd 2008). At a press conference a spokesman of the Aluku gold miners, said that they shared the worry of the government about the environmental impacts of gold mining, but that they were shocked by the fact that local communities were not consulted about the Operation beforehand. To the Aluku, this was a "dictatorial decision that disregards chances for survival of many families by taking away their source of income; gold mining" (West 2008). Seemingly, the laissez faire policy of the Suriname government has come to an end, and it is unsure what the future will bring with respect to Aluku claims to the right to mine gold on their customary lands.

Notwithstanding renewed attention for their territories from Suriname's national government, Suriname Wayana and Aluku continue without any government services. This situation forces Suriname's tribal groups to search for their own economic resources – among which gold seems most beneficial. The choice for gold mining is ambiguous though, and as said above, creates divisions within the communities. Especially youngsters take the liberty to extract gold without formally asking permission from the traditional authorities. On their turn, tribal authorities close deals with gold miners on their own account and for their own gain, without consulting with the village. These developments are not confined to the Lawa region, but are witnessed in and near mining areas throughout Suriname.

For both the Wayana and the Aluku the new political and economic developments are changing life in many ways. The nation states, France and Suriname, increasingly leave their mark on the daily life of the inhabitants of the region. Repression of gold mining by French police and a growing grip of Suriname authorities on the economy in the region, threaten the self-determination of the Aluku and Wayana. The interest from outsiders in general, forces the Lawa people to reconsider their relation to their land, their traditions, and each other; in other words, it forces them to rethink their identity and ways of survival. It is now up to the traditional authorities to guide their communities and customary law systems through the period of rapid change induced by gold mining.

Synthesis

Despite the lack of formal land rights, Wayana and Aluku in the Lawa region have a strong perception of their tribal ownership of the territory where they live. In practice this is reinforced by the absence of national law enforcement and state provisions in Suriname. The case of the burnt-pontoon-incident reflects the sensitive relation with the two nation states they have to deal with. It also demonstrates the ways tribal people the development of their region into their own hands. In this process they may ally with foreign gold miners and seek benefits from relationships with them. The pontoon was partly financed by Brazilian miners working in the Wayana territory, who also provided technical assistance, and thus helped the Wayana generate their own income from gold mining. While for the Wayana gold mining was a new activity, the Aluku have a much longer history of participation in gold mining. The nature of this participation has changed though, from being gold diggers, to large machine owners who employ migrant workers, and customary concessionaries who demand fees from anyone working on their lands.

This economic self sufficiency of both Wayana and Aluku is undermined by the policy (or lack thereof) of the nation states – Suriname and France – vis-à-vis their tribal populations and gold mining. First, the French policy of destruction of mining enterprises and service delivery is destroying condign capital and their self chosen options for betterment. Second, the Suriname indifference towards tribal peoples places them in a vulnerable position faced

with the issuance of legal concessions. Third, efforts of the Suriname government to regulate the small scale gold mining sector create more chaos by deregulating the tribal self organization based on customary and miners' laws. Through these means tribal peoples are losing their access to the land and mineral resources they have traditionally managed and still depend upon for their survival.

In this power play Aluku and Wayana communities are heterogeneous, being composed of people with different interests and degrees of power and options to gain wealth from gold mining. In the Wayana community those with direct financial interest in the mining sector are increasingly opposed by primarily French members who are experiencing the adverse health effects of small scale gold mining. For the Suriname Wayana, who do not receive any governmental support, banning mining is not an option. Instead they propose limiting mining to certain parts of their territory where less harm will be done to the environment and local population. Even though the Aluku generally favour gold mining, who mines, where, and has rights to benefits remains contested.

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Note

- 1 Statement of Granman Ipomadi T. Pelenapin of Kawemhakan, June 6, 2007.
- 2 See http://www.defense.gouv.fr/gendarmerie/dossiers/anaconda_lutte_contre_l_orpillage_clandestin (accessed October 22, 2008).
- 3 Apart from the fact that this was *Suriname* territory, of course.
- 4 Children are allowed to attend elementary school in the Wayana and Aluku villages in French Guiana.
- 5 Interview with *kapitein* Amasia (Cottica 9 July 2007).

- 6 The population increases and a decade ago there were 3000-3500 Aluku living in the Lawa basin (Orru, *et al.* 2000).
- 7 The Ndjuka are a Maroon group who live along the Marowijne, lower Lawa, and Tapanahoni rivers.
- 8 While the village head of Kawemhakan is named *granman* among his followers, for official government purposes he is a *kapitein*.
- 9 Kawemhakan, May 2007.
- 10 Kawemhakan, May 2007
- 11 *Granman* Ipomadi Pelenapin, Kawemhakan, May 2007
- 12 Written by an indigenous NGO named Solidarité Guyane. URL: http://www.solidarite-guyane.org/Lettre_ouverte2008.htm.
- 13 Kawemhakan, May 2008.